Beyond the Self:
How Wonder Guards against Sentimentality

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In a sermon delivered at Oxford in 1941, the essayist and literary scholar C.S. Lewis opened his address by distinguishing between the virtues of "unselfishness" and "love." In this distinction he noted a critical loss that occurs in the shift from love to unselfishness, remarking that this is itself a shift from a positive pursuit to a negative avoidance.[1] Rather than concerning itself with the good of others, as love does, unselfishness concerns itself with avoiding or giving up good things for the self. Under this light, the quality of unselfishness masquerades as a virtue while instead feeding the self-focused desire to be a virtuous person. By framing the situation upon the self, with eyes turned inwards to how kind or caring one is acting rather than outwards towards a genuine appreciation of the other, the unselfish act promises the individual that they are indeed unselfish. At its core, unselfishness coddles the underlying ego of a person. It persuades us that we are the source of our character and tells us that our feelings of unselfishness are the basis upon which we should act. The more unselfish we feel we are being, the better we suppose our actions to be. Love, on the other hand, takes as its focus and foundation the actual person being cared for. Unselfishness concerns itself with how much is given up for another while love concentrates on the other and will give of itself as needed. The cloying allure of unselfishness is that it acts in a caring fashion towards others to feed the feeling of being good. The sound benefit of love is that it desires only the good of the other person.

This shift from the external positive of love to the internal negative of unselfishness marks a broader trend of exchanged virtues in the west, as culture trades authentic relations with the world for a sentimental focus on the self. In describing the path of this exchange of values, the social theorist and philosopher Charles Taylor titled the resulting cultural moment the "age of

[1] C.S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory." In *The Weight of Glory* (Harper Collins Publishing, 1976), 25.

disenchantment," a term initially coined by the historian Max Weber in 1918. Having been filled with the notion that scientific fact replaces myth, the disenchanted culture steadily robs the world of its significance and places meaning into the hands of the individual.[2] In a disenchanted world, a tree no longer bears power or meaning within itself but instead is given meaning by my own internal processes and perception. Authentic relation to the tree, or indeed anything beyond myself, thus becomes an impossibility, for I have been buffered against any meaning that might reside beyond those that I assign. Any feelings I may have towards a significance within the tree, or indeed any feelings I may have of the transcendent, are instead trivialized to be the mere projection of my internal perceptions or inclinations.[3] The narrative of a humanity that fits into a broader order of nature or the cosmos has been traded away for an order that is entirely flattened and compressed into the self.

Such a notable and marked shift in values must find its source in more than simply the whim of culture, for meaning does not merely appear and disappear of its own accord. Instead, disenchantment arises from the simultaneous increase in social mobility and decrease of social integration found in the west.[4] The individual feels that the source of meaning and significance must come from their interior life, since the surrounding society no longer champions a single cosmology or source of meaning.[5] No longer do the farmer and the soldier fit into their roles as extensions of a single social entity, but instead they must now define their own personal identities and live out their truths accordingly. This disintegration of the individual with society generates a governing notion of self-determinism. What results is a re-ordering of the interior

[2] Charles Taylor, *Cosmic Connections: Poetry in the Age of Disenchantment* (Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2024), 46.
[3] Charles Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity* (Harvard University Press, 1991), 5.
[4] Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 26.
[5] Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 29.

self to eclipse the external world. In a thoroughly disenchanted and individualized society, then, the only possible virtue remaining is that of being true to the self.

With disenchantment creating such a buffer between the individual and the world, sentimentality becomes the default perspective, for it securely points the eyes of the individual onto the movements of their internal sentiments rather than upon the external things which spark such sentiments. What results are people that are untouchable and detached from the things around them. Sentimental people are removed from the spaces, relationships, and external world they occupy, and cannot be challenged and changed by what they might encounter. Much like the unselfish person for whom the target of his unselfishness is irrelevant, the sentimental person does not actually relate to the things around him but instead places his sentiments upon whatever lies before him. By positioning the external world below interior sentiments, anything beyond the self is transformed into an instrument or means to an end. The target of sentimental thought is simply the arbitrary location upon which sentiments can be placed. To borrow language from the mid-century philosopher Martin Buber, sentimentality treats everything as a mere "thing among things," that is, an "It" to be used, contained, and controlled, rather than a "You" to be in relation with.[6]

There is a marked danger in falling toward such a sentimental approach to reality. Rather than pursuing friendship with someone because he is important and worthy of being known, I instead desire friendship because I find his company pleasant or feel that he makes me a better person. Likewise, the sentimental theatergoer does not leave the opera, play, or symphony having encountered an artistic work and expression but instead leaves with the self-satisfied

[6] Martin Buber, translated by Walter Kaufmann. *I and Thou*. (Free Press, 1970), 29.

feeling that they are someone who has been to the symphony. In both instances the sentimental life has been hollowed out and emptied of substance. Where the danger of sentimentality is most apparent, however, is in its reliance on what Taylor calls "instrumental reasoning," that is, the mode of thought which looks exclusively to the utility and function of things for their value. It is instrumental reasoning which sees only the practicality of assigning set monetary value to individual persons during emergency relief yet remains blind to the unquantifiable value of each person.[7] While it is certainly helpful and important to be able to weigh decisions in times of crisis, a sentimental mindset offers no avenue for these abstracted individuals to be seen as anything other than data. To continually consider things as the mere accumulation of qualities generates a constant eclipsing of the You of the other with the very thingness of the It.[8] With eyes turned continually inward, the sentimental person treads alarmingly towards the selfish notion that they are the only being who matters.

Now certainly if unselfishness is a form of sentimentality, then the sentimental notion that only I matter is not always a conscious act. For a person to be aware of his self-focused perspective and actively choose it would be blunt selfishness, which is an issue of its own and is far removed from the illusions of sentimentality. The very nature of unselfishness, and in broader terms sentimentality, is that its substance is entirely parasitic. Just as unselfishness convinces us that we are achieving a virtue by entertaining postures of unselfishness, so too does sentimentality tell the story that its feelings are proper and right. To feed sentimentality acknowledges the sense of a deeper reality beyond the self, affirming that feeling without

[7] Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 5.
[8] Buber, *I and Thou*, 32.

seeking to approach the deeper reality much at all.[9] The sentimental person does not realize that he is being sentimental; the control which he seeks to hold over all elements of his life and experience has been hidden from him by his own habits and desires. This internalized falsity is precisely what makes moments such as Vronsky and Anna's relationship in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* so emotionally complex. Were Vronsky and Anna aware that they were merely seeking their own desires through one another rather than truly caring for each other, the false claims of love they make to one another would ring completely hollow. Instead, both Vronsky and Anna are continually at a loss as to why the other person does not feel loved, for they are themselves convinced that their feelings constitute love. The sentimental lover believes the songs he sings are genuine, for sentimentality has invaded and replaced the faculty which was once authentic love.

In contrast to this disenchanted and sentimental climate then stands a genuine and self-forgetful focus on others found in what Taylor calls the "ethic of authenticity."[10] Just as unselfishness demonstrates the sentimental turn inward and away from the other, love stands as an example of the authentic impulse towards the other. To live with authenticity is to humble ourselves before the substance that surrounds us. Authentic love between a parent and child does not concern itself with fulfilling the parent's self-identity as a parent. Indeed, such a parent who sees his children as merely the means towards the end of parenting has lost the very root from which family flourishes, that is, the loving guidance and care of a child for that child's own

[9] The German personalist philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand discusses this at length in his book *Beauty in the Light of Redemption*, where he draws the distinction between the "aesthete" who seeks merely the pleasure of art, the "philistine" who denies all art and beauty due to their inarticulate nature, and the true artistic vision which perceives a unity and presence in art and things of beauty. Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light of Redemption* (Hildebrand Press, 2019), 32-34.

[10] Taylor, *Ethics of Authenticity*, 72.

good. A proper parent will certainly sacrifice much for the child, and we would be right in saying that this is a central part of the role of parent, but the significance of this sacrifice is found in the love of the child rather than in its alignment with parental identity. Likewise, authentic love for music does not look to the amount of enjoyment that can be gained out of the music but instead focuses on the music itself as a source of significance. The divide between sentimentality and authenticity is ultimately a distinction in control. Sentimentality seeks control of the world as an It, understood and encountered through the I. Authenticity joyfully recognizes the futility of complete control over both the I and the You, and instead focuses on the connection between the two.[11]

A picture of something quite different than sentimentality is starting to appear in authenticity: a genuine connection between the newly individualized self and the broader external world. Such a connection is nourishing in the deepest and most meaningful sense, yet, like a furnace, it requires constant tending or else its flame dies out.[12] With disenchantment having taken a firm hold in the west, authentic relations are constantly under attack by the buffered self through which all things are perceived. The individual has been barred from a passive place within a broader cosmic order and must therefore constantly re-assert this connection in the face of the surrounding disenchantment.[13] What we need is more than the erasure or undoing of disenchantment. Instead, we need the steady re-discovery of the external world in relation to the newfound interior self. This process of re-discovery must move us away

[11] Buber, *I and Thou,* 13.
[12] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections,* 133.
[13] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections,* 47.

from the self-focused perspective of sentimentality and open our eyes to the presence of others in authentic relations.

What then causes the heart to make this move from sentimentality to authenticity, and how might the individual continue to tend the fire of authenticity once it has been ignited? In short, the relationship lost in the movement from authenticity to sentimentality is precisely the same source by which authenticity may be regained from the mire of sentimentality. To grow sentimental is to lose sight of the other for the self. In order to regain authenticity, then, we must humbly encounter the other not through mere thoughts or rational argument but instead through experience. Indeed, to try and find the external world through the process of logical reasoning, which is itself located entirely within the self, would result only in a return to sentimentality since it looks inward for that which lies outside. What is needed is not more thoughts or rational arguments based in reason alone, but instead a return to wonder to remind us that there are more than merely thoughts, to confront us with the undeniable presence of the external world around us, and to remind us of our place within it. By stepping into moments of wonder, where the very being-ness of a person or thing is impressed undeniably upon the soul, we might then carry the spark of relationship back into the world and rekindle authenticity.[14] Wonder is therefore the required bridge or path by which the disenchanted and buffered self might pass through sentimentality and into authenticity.

What precisely is this wonder, and how does it operate? This is the first of a series of questions which the rest of this paper is devoted to answering. It is, of course, a rather large question to tackle. Indeed, one may even argue that the very idea of writing about wonder is

[14] Buber, *I and Thou*, 45.

itself a reduction and trivialization of it. In many ways I am inclined to agree. It treads dangerously near sentimentality for one to dwell upon the nature of wonder instead of authentically wondering. One cannot truly partake in the depth of flavors found in a rich meal while simultaneously considering the nature of "flavor" and "taste" at arm's length. We ought not banish intellectual discourse as antithetical to wonder, however, for it has its place within wonder as well. While one cannot contemplate the nature of "flavor" at the same time as truly enjoying flavor, considerations of "flavor" in the abstract can lend a deeper capacity to enjoy flavor in its particularities. Just so with music, and painting, and relationships, and love. To contemplate the abstract qualities of wonder can similarly strengthen the act of wondering at particulars.

Before moving on to answer this question, however, it is important to recognize that I am not looking to create a definition of wonder as science creates a definition of gravity. There is no single operation or tangible law by which wonder acts. Indeed, the very nature of wonder is necessarily set upon assumptions and reveals the beliefs at the foundation of all claims to truth, thought, and meaning. I am therefore making an appeal to experience and relations that point to wonder rather than scientific proof for my position. Western culture has developed an unfortunate distaste for any sort of assumption, being instead inclined towards scientific comprehension and understanding. It is important to recognize that no knowledge may arise without faith in something, however. A hard and fast scientific materialist who believes that there is no substance beyond physical matter is still acting on the assumption that human rationality has sound access to truth. To assume such is not untenable, but it does fall outside of the realm of scientific proof. There is no scientific law that can declare all scientific laws valid beyond belief. Since wonder operates upon the realm of assumptions then, I should acknowledge that I am coming to this paper with belief in a power and meaning beyond myself. Rather than

appealing to that belief to support my claims, however, I intend to lay out the case that a perspective open to meaning beyond the self is in fact necessary for wonder in the face of sentimentality, since wonder is the very thing that opens up our eyes to the edges of our knowledge.

To those that would prize scientific proof with a preciousness beyond its station I should like to invoke Lewis's appeal to the importance of "looking along" things as well as clinically "looking at" them. Looking *at* something holds that thing at a distance and analyzes it according to broad logical criteria, while looking *along* something sees the experiential qualities of a given thing from within complete belief or absorption into that thing. Looking at is an important mode of considering things to be sure, but the scientific practice of looking at things has often been wielded as though it alone bears the sole access to truth or reality. To use Lewis's example in his essay "Meditation in a Toolshed," for a young man in love, looking at his beloved *along* his love reveals a countenance filled with grace and glowing presence that, to him, is undeniable. To the neuroscientist looking *at* the young man and his beloved, he sees a series of chemical and electrical impulses in the young man's brain and simply another human person in the young man's beloved. Nether view is more right nor more wrong than the other, yet each would seem to disprove the other at their core. To the young man, the notion that his love is mere chemistry is preposterous, for he *knows* the truth that he has felt through being in love. To the neuroscientist, the love cannot be anything more than mere chemistry, and should the young man feel otherwise, this is just a symptom of the chemical processes.[15] Throughout this paper, then, I will be

[15] C.S. Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed" in *God on the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 215.

spending considerable time talking as one looking *along* wonder and appealing to those who might do the same.

With the underlying assumptions covered, I may now get on with the task at hand and begin to lay out a definition for wonder. At its most basic, I will define wonder as moments of humble recognition, wherein a being's presence and unity eclipse its thingness and brings the self to harmonize in the shared existence found there. This definition will only respond to the first of the big questions about wonder, however. Springing forth from this definition is the question of where wonder might arise from. It will become apparent that wonder cannot be forced upon the self *by* the self, as that is the very definition of sentiment, so its origin must be found in some source beyond the self.

Only after the origin of wonder has been thoroughly established might I embark into the third question that arises about wonder, namely, how does wonder function within actual lived experience, particularly amidst the constant losses found throughout the human experience? Wonder has unfortunately gained a reputation as a word too readily associated with trite pleasantness and a certain childish escapism. A modern skeptic of wonder might say that wonder cannot be applicable in the face of the horrors that accompany modern adult life, so a mature perspective should abandon that simple fantasy and grow up to the world as it is. In answering this challenge, I must make use of another challenge which I will unpack later, that is, without a grander narrative that is itself truly *wonder*ful, where might suffering or loss get its meaning? Wonder, rather than being an abstract and sugar-coated idea, must instead be understood as a powerfully challenging relationship which both embeds the individual into this world in all its sorrows and joys and enchants the individual with a sense of purposefulness.

With all this explored the final question to address is what might make up the *end* of wonder. By "end" here I mean both the goal and result of wonder as well as that which draws it to a close. Wonder itself is not the mere fulfillment of a desire as eating is to hunger. Wonder does not end because we have had our fill of it, nor is its purpose to simply fill a void. Instead, it must be brought to a close by other things acting upon it, its brilliant colors fading like the sunrise such that all is seen in the remaining light. As such, wonder becomes an unresolved moment outside of time, incomplete yet whole. It is ended by the necessities of mundane life and the movement of time, leaving us with an ecstatic glimpse of timelessness amidst the rhythm of life.

Humility and Recognition

I should begin once more with that initial definition which I provided for wonder, that wonder is a moment of humble recognition, and unpack what it means and entails. Looking back to the distinction between looking at and looking along something, wonder as humble recognition is entirely based around the process of looking *along* the relationship between the self and the other.[16] Indeed, recognition itself may fall into two separate forms. The first is the recognition involved in any sort of basic symbol system or comprehension of general information. This recognition is one of mere faculty; it is how we draw information out of the scribblings of writing and how we parse and engage with the world around us. This sort of recognition views the world in terms of qualities and characteristics, that is, as a series of It's.[17] I may recognize my friend in this manner when I see him across the street, because I have subconsciously matched the visual sight of his face with the memory of his face that I have

[16] Lewis, "Meditation in a Toolshed," 216.
[17] Buber, *I and Thou,* 3.

developed over time knowing him. More broadly, I may recognize my friend as a series of qualities that I have known, perhaps as a quick-witted individual, or someone who deeply likes to juggle. In this sense of recognition, I am seeking understanding about my friend, for he has become the man with the brown hair, snappy jokes, or collection of juggling pins. I understand him as the simple accumulation of qualities which I comprehend rather than as a person unto himself. He is a "He", not a "You."[18]

There is yet another way in which I may recognize my friend, however, and it is this second form of recognition which makes up wonder. I may recognize him as a feeling and living entity, empathizing with the parts of his personhood that I share mutually, and allowing the parts of his personhood which are apart from my own to carry a weight and place obligations upon me. No longer is my friend merely the combination of qualities which I recognize in the former sense, but instead all of his qualities are resolved into the unity of his being and extend to be more than the sum of these qualities. This recognition does not belong exclusively to relations between people, however, for it may occur just as readily when encountering a sunrise, a poem, or a painting. When wonder occurs, the entirety of the presence before us is impressed upon us, each of its innumerable qualities being caught up into a single unified being that is undeniably substantial. The sunrise, the poem, the painting, or the person that we encounter is exalted to be completely whole before us such that we are subsumed into an authentic relationship between beings.[19] This unity is precisely what the German philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand saw at the core of an artistic vision of reality, for the beauty of the artistic vision pierces through individual pleasant qualities to the single unified Being of God.[20] Likewise, Buber noted that in

[18] Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.
[19] Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.
[20] Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light of Redemption*, 57.

all I-You relationships the Eternal You of God is addressed, for He gives substance to all other beings.[21] The recognition that makes up wonder does not seek understanding about the presence before it but instead attains knowledge of the presence in its overwhelming wholeness.

It is within this second form of recognition where humility dwells. In order to acknowledge my friend's personhood in a fashion that is beyond mere information, I must lay down my sense of control over my surroundings and let his personhood *impact* me. The same is true for the encountering of a sunrise, a poem, and so forth. If I look to my friend and attempt to categorize him, fitting him into a box that can only contain a thing rather than a person, I once more trivialize him into a He rather than a You.[22] If I recognize my friend with humility, however, the relationship is drawn between us. I cannot comprehend him and yet I now know him as an entire unified being. Likewise, if I look at a sunrise and see it as *merely* the different refractions of electromagnetic waves against suspended gases it is trivialized into a thing. Wondering at the sunrise might very well include such considerations – and truly it *is* wonderful to consider the rich scientific complexity that makes up each simple sunrise – but they are accompanied by a knowledge of the sunrise as a complete substance. This knowledge is devoid of comprehension and drawn out from my inmost being by the presence of the sunrise. I cannot help but contemplate the sunrise if its unified presence has been made known to me. I no longer have control over the unified presence before me, yet I must now live my life in its light.[23]

It is not enough that wonder includes giving over control of our surroundings, for we may still give over control of external things while keeping our interior being safely removed and

[21] Buber, *I and Thou*, 85.

[23] Buber, *I and Thou*, 7.

couched within a barricade of sentimentality. Wonder, as I have thus described it, pushes beyond the reclamation of the complete entity out of mere thing-ness and reaches into my own interior self, confronting me in my entirety and calling me towards a continually higher mode of being.[24] Wonder takes hold of the substance of the external world and draws it to fill the entire horizon of our perception. Precisely in this way wonder challenges us, for it intimately presents us with a reality that is vastly more significant than ourselves. The presence before us is now encountered in its entirety, and its significance brought to bear on our soul such that we are forced to contend with it on its terms, not our own. The presence becomes a sacred entity, standing before us as both a part of the world and yet entirely removed from mundanity. It calls us to leave behind our own banality for that which is more real.[25]

At this point it should be clear that wonder as I am describing it is far removed from any sort of mere pleasantness or entertainment. While entertainment acts as a form of diversion away from the mundanity of everyday life, it does not draw us back into authentic relation with the world but instead retreats further away from it. Unlike wonder, entertainment still functions on the individual's terms. I may choose to turn on some music or watch a movie and at my own whim I may then change or turn off these entertainments. Wonder, on the other hand, occurs outside of, and often despite, my choice. I cannot force myself to wonder so that I might gain its benefits. Indeed, those who would seek wonder for its benefits alone will never truly wonder at all. Much like being made aware of your tongue in your mouth or being concerned about what to do with your hands when speaking to another person, the moment you become aware of the act of wondering and attempt to force yourself back into wonder is the moment when wonder

[24] Buber, *I and Thou*, 10.
[25] Roger Scruton, *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 147.

becomes an act as opposed to a relationship. In his Andrew Lang lecture on fairy stories delivered in 1939, J.R.R. Tolkien argues for a similar distinction as that which I am describing, classifying belief as necessarily opposed to the suspension of disbelief in the face of fairy-stories. By believing in the world of Faerie, I become invested in the weight of the world and the presences it contains. To be self-conscious of this belief then kills this investment. No matter how much I may try and suspend my disbelief to re-enter the world, there is no more investment beyond pretended sentiments.[26] This same divide splits wonder from mere performance. Wonder must be believed to be substantial; we cannot create wonder from the desire to wonder alone.

From here a difficult tension arises, for wonder is not merely some ephemeral entity which we hope to entertain or catch yet which we have no agency over. What arises is a deeply difficult task which, by nature of wonder's ineffability, cannot be accomplished by the simple completion of specific steps. We cannot reduce the spells cast in fairy-stories to the simple accumulation of the right elements. It is not enough that the Green Knight in Gawain be of such a verdant hue, but the very realm of King Arthur's court is what lends him his magic. Likewise with sacraments, the power of the bread in communion or the water in baptism is not reliant on merely filling out the steps and specific materials involved. What is needed is true belief, the humbling of the self before an entity beyond the self. The difficulty is that we cannot force ourselves to be truly humble nor force ourselves to believe more deeply. Humility breeds humility and belief breeds belief. Such authentic entities cannot grow from a soil of only sentiment.

[26] J.R.R. Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories" in *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays,* ed. Christopher Tolkien (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1984), 132.

Is Sentimentality Inescapable?

These difficulties give rise to an important question to address: if we cannot force ourselves to wonder, then can anyone truly wonder? Since wonder cannot be forced, how can we bring ourselves to wonder when our instinct has turned to sentimentality? A sentimental pursuit of wonder cannot breed wonder on its own, so it would seem that the sentimental is inevitable and, once it has taken over, permanent. What develops is a paradox. We need wonder to pull us from sentimentality to authenticity yet wonder requires an authentic relationship between the wonderer and the wonderful being to occur. Suddenly we seem to be left in a forest with no compass and no light, only to get further and further lost.

Attempts to answer this question may turn to education or divine intervention as the source of wonder, but the very nature of this question finds itself looking *at* wonder as opposed to looking *along* it. Considering first the turn to education, such a solution fails to find wonder's source outside of sentimentality. If feelings of wonder can or must be taught, then wonder does not genuinely spring forth from the relationship of the self with the other but instead from the mere fulfillment of the ideals imposed by education. A husband does not love and wonder at his wife authentically if he merely does it because he *ought* to love his wife, regardless of who she is and without engaging with the uniqueness which makes her herself. So too does a musician not authentically wonder at music because she knows the harmonic series to be a subject which people deem worthy of study or which her instructor has explained to be important. The husband loves his wife because he has encountered her as a person unto herself and he wonders at the world as it shines in her light. The musician too loves music because she recognizes a substance within it that moves beyond words and contains meaning or value within its immense complexity. For the musician to wonder at music *because* she has been taught to is not

wondering at music at all but is instead using music as a means towards an abstract ideal. Education certainly is capable of encouraging wonder, but it cannot be the source itself.

If education is not a viable source of wonder, then perhaps wonder is placed upon the soul by some force, possibly divine, thereby avoiding the faultiness of human sentimentality. This option accounts for the paradox of finding wonder amidst sentimentality, however, it lacks a critical nuance. It is indeed a very fine line between wonder being placed upon me by a force controlling my inmost experiences and the drawing froth of wonder out of unavoidable obligation. Should wonder exclusively arise from a governing force disconnected from myself, then wonder is not grounded in the relationship between myself and another being but remains an inauthentic fulfillment of an abstract. I would not be humbly recognizing the being that lies before me and its presence would not encompass my entire horizon as Buber would have it.[27] Just as with the first solution, such an imposition of wonder upon me would be focused on a goal outside of the relationship of wonder rather than the wonderful presence before me.

Since neither education nor external force may be what pulls wonder out of the depths of sentimentality, what remains is to look *along* wonder as opposed to merely *at* it. If wonder is known and experienced as the humble recognition of a presence before and beyond the self, then its source is likewise found in that irresistibly wonderful presence. Rather than locating the source of wonder in either interior action, as the first answer does, or exterior imposition, as the second answer does, looking *along* wonder finds it in the space between the self and the other. Take once more the husband who loves his wife. As has been established, such an authentic love cannot originate from his duty to an abstract ideal nor intervening control, yet he cannot help but

[27] Buber, *I and Thou*, 7-8.

love his wife. His love for her is irresistibly drawn forth by her undeniably wonderful presence. No one ought to deny him this love, however, stating that her loveliness has forced him to love her. It is his love; he has chosen her despite the fact that he could not help but choose her. So too with the musician who wonders at music. She wonders at music because she has encountered a power within it which pierces her to her core and floods over the horizon of her perception. Wonder springs forth from an undeniable encounter such as these; it must be self-generating.

When viewed from the outside, looking *at* wonder as opposed to *along* it, such an explanation is unfortunately unsatisfying and circular, producing the very paradox I am seeking to resolve. The experience of wonder, when seen through its own lens, reveals those things which lie outside of our capability to comprehend. Such unknown unknowns are those things to which we are blind, even to the extent of not knowing that we are ignorant of them. Wonder provides a connection to these unknown unknowns, revealing their presence without granting understanding of them. It is as if we have shown a light into a cave and seen a shadow projected onto the back wall. We cannot see the thing that is causing the shadow, but by the very lack of information we know that there is something undeniably there. Something exists beyond the farthest boundaries of our understanding. Wonder reaches the edges of our understanding and reveals the beliefs that lie there. Looking *at* wonder finds this appeal to unknown unknowns tremendously dissatisfying. When I say that I know the sun has risen this morning, the source of that knowledge is not myself but rather the light of the sun as it is present before me. To someone who refuses to look along the sunlight, this appeal to the existence of the sun is weak and illogical, but if he would just glance into the sunlight he might know that the sun undeniably exists.

The Teaching and Placement of Wonder

It is here that I should like to return to the idea that education, while far from being the *source* of wonder, might still strongly encourage and nurture it. As has hopefully been established well in the previous sections, wonder is a thing which cannot be taught, either as a faculty or an ideal. What can be taught — or perhaps a better phrase might be "passed on"— are the tools by which continually deeper facets of meaning might be encountered. At its most basic, education is necessary to pass on language, that is, the symbolic means that allow us to parse and interpret the world. For example, in order for me to be capable of wondering at the stories of literature I must first have learned the language of the story and the capacity to read it. Only by learning the rules and applications of language as it transmits meaning can I access the substance inside of a story.

The learning of language is a rather basic example. What then of poetry? The mere learning of language only begins to equip me for the depths of wonder that may be experienced through the written word. While I may find wonder at Shakespeare's sonnets with only a general knowledge of the English language, learning about meter and rhyme, let alone metaphor and methods of critical analysis, opens the door to a newfound wonder at subsequent layers of meaning. Learning about meter or methods of analysis here does not cause the wonder, nor is education the focus of this wonder. I do not find Shakespeare's Sonnet 14 wonderful merely because it *has* a meter, nor do I find Vermeer's *The Milkmaid* wonderful because it uses the rules of western composition well. I wonder at Sonnet 14 because it communicates something beyond mere language through poetic devices, meter among them. Likewise, Vermeer's application of the laws of western composition in *The Milkmaid* is used to enhance the sense of intimacy and quietude in the work. Education in disciplines such as poetic analysis and compositional study

provides access to layers of meaning, but it does not generate meaning itself. This is precisely why Lewis argues for the continued appreciation of children's stories in his essay "On Three Ways of Writing Children's Stories."[28] The maturing of taste through education provides the expansion of wonder, not merely the re-assignment of it. Equipped with a deeper understanding of narrative and the world, I may return to stories and artwork I appreciated in my childhood and find greater wonder there. Simultaneously, equipped by education, I may also approach more complex entities that I would not instinctively appreciate in my youth and wonder at them in turn.

By education here I must distinguish that I am referring to more than the sort found exclusively in the lecture hall or college campus. The act of creating art itself may even be considered a form of education, for the artist is attempting to manifest a sort of transmission of substance that reaches beyond themselves. Hildebrand describes the creation of artwork much in this manner, stating that the artist first sees a unified meaning or substance in a moment of reality and then seeks to articulate this meaning so that her artistic vision might be revealed in part to the viewer.[29] The artist is attempting to generate a unique form of education, one which might bear the relational power of wonder in its own right. Buber describes this process as one of sacrifice: the artist is sacrificing the infinite possible forms that might be manifest in the artwork, crystalizing it into an entity which is capable of holding the You and therefore points to a substance beyond itself.[30] Under Hildebrand's view, the created artwork is meant to equip the viewer with their own facet or glimpse of the artist's wondrous vision, that they might then carry

[28] C.S. Lewis, "Three Ways of Writing Children's Stories" in On Stories: and Other Essays on Literature (Harper Collins Publishing, 1982), 51.
[29] Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light of Redemption*, 58-59.
[30] Buber, *I and Thou*, 8.

it with them out into the world and wonder at the substance there as well. So too with Buber, for he states that any relationship with the You provides a spark which may then be carried into the "It-world" to reinvigorate it. This spark and the glimpse of the artistic vision may both be understood as simply describing authenticity.[31] Even with education defined in this extended manner, however, it still does not act as the *source* of wonder. As Lewis puts it in his essay "On Stories": "No man would find an abiding strangeness in the Moon unless he were the sort of man who could find it in his own back garden."[32] For education to pass on a tenderness towards wonder still requires the individual to wonder of their own accord. Being relational, wonder must first take root in the space between the perceiver and the perceived.

While education may certainly open new avenues towards wonder through both simple and complex things, I am not denying that there is a separation between things of substance and things of emptiness. Some parts of the world, both natural and created, certainly lend themselves more to wonder than others. The very process of maturing one's taste involves learning to recognize that which can bear more substance and acquiring the ability to place more weight into relations with such things. In terms of man-made or created things, it does not do that the object merely has been made, or even that it was made with great skill, but instead it must itself be born from an authentic relation to the world, either positive or negative.[33] Even the barest glimmer of authenticity provides the substance needed for wonder's relationship to take hold.

If a poet has nothing to say, if he is writing not out of wonder at the real but instead as a diversion away from it, then the poetic words he writes will at worst ring hollow and weak and at

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[31] Buber, *I and Thou*, 45.
[32] C.S. Lewis, "On Stories" in On Stories: and Other Essays on Literature (Harper Collins Publishing, 1982), 16.
[33] Hildebrand, *Beauty in the Light of Redemption*, 58-59.

best bear only parasitic relevance to the real world of the reader. Such things of emptiness require the sentimental manufacturing of value in order to survive. Without a viewer, these things are revealed for the phantoms that they are. Being so divorced from the substance of the world, things of emptiness seek either to draw the individual further away from reality or to invade reality and replace it with a falsehood. Objects such as pornography stand as the clearest example of such empty and parasitic things. They mimic the real with the goal of replacing it. Reality and things of emptiness cannot exist simultaneously; one must eliminate the other. This is precisely why the imagined "tempters" in Lewis's fictional *Screwtape Letters* are instructed to turn their target's focus in prayer away from the actual God and instead towards the abstract caricature of a "god" who sits in the upper corner of the room or in the crucifix on the wall.[34] A true and authentic relationship with the real God is destroyed by its replacement with a parasitic emptiness that itself requires constant upkeep in order to exist.

How Wonder Interacts with Loss

Up until now I have been discussing wonder in an abstract and positive light. Indeed, it is a positive force, for it pulls us out of our sentimentality and into authenticity with the real world we occupy. Despite my focus on the positive thus far, however, wonder must likewise contend with the sobering reality of loss and sorrow. While it is a positive force, wonder is yet far removed from a sugar-sweet denial of loss. It is not ignorant of the losses and sorrows that pervade real life. To be human is to live in a rhythm of continual loss and gain; every second that passes, every choice made, and every action taken adds to a swath of potential paths, possibilities, and moments lost. The very age of disenchantment is defined by a loss of

[34] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (Harper Collins Publishing, 1996), 18.

significance and magic from the surrounding world. Just as the artist sacrifices the infinite possibilities of creativity for the actuality of the crystalized artwork, so too do we sacrifice what could be for what now is.[35] Being itself requires the loss of potential into actualization.

A sentimental approach to these losses attempts to relieve them by playing an all-or-nothing game, creating a false dichotomy between two options. The first sentimental answer to loss is to deny it outright and instead flee into the fantasy of a world without loss. This the sort of saccharine escapism can be found in the sentimental paintings of Thomas Kinkade or the cheap cries of a prosperity gospel preacher. By painting a picture of a world without loss, sentimentality provides soft and pleasant feelings that are comfortable. They require no vulnerability, no discomfort, and no relinquishing of control.[36] The alternative path sentimentality provides in the face of loss is nihilism. By considering all things as hollow and lost, each individual loss becomes indistinguishable and therefore loses its sting. While this second option may seem more aligned with reality since it acknowledges the reality of loss, it robs each loss of its significance and refuses to take on the challenge of genuinely processing each loss.

If wonder is therefore to draw us back towards an authentic relationship with being, then it cannot stand in denial of the losses innate to being, nor can it deny the substance and significance of the world of being. Indeed, one of the key functions of wonder as it pulls our hearts across from sentimentality into authenticity is its power to help digest and process all the losses that occur in life. In the face of losses which pull our minds towards either that which was and is now lost or towards that which could have been but is not, wonder acts to both embed us

[35] Buber, *I and Thou*, 9.
[36] Roger Scruton. "Faking It." In Confessions of a Heretic. (Notting Hill Editions, 2021), 13.

into the present reality and enchant us with the purposefulness of that reality. The relationship born of wonder between the ourselves and the other draws the very presence before us into the *present*, embedding us into the mutual space we occupy with that presence and the unified whole which makes up the present moment.[37] By stepping into a moment of resonance between my own being and the substance around me, my past, including the losses therein, is affirmed as its own unified presence. I am granted a place and belonging within the same tapestry of reality as the wonderful presence before me.

At the very same moment that we are embedded into reality and made to belong in the present wonder equally enchants us with the broader significance and purpose that stretches out beyond the immediate. In enchanting us thusly, we are made to belong in this broader purpose as well. The moment of wonder provides a sense of significance that transcends the self and finds its completion yet to come. Here we once more encounter a paradox within wonder, for it places us into the present in our entirety and yet simultaneously draws us towards some point of completion in the future. How might the immanent and transcendent fit into the same moment? Consider a character in a story. He certainly belongs in the scene or dialogue of the moment. At the same time, however, he belongs even more in the resolution at the end of the story. The individual scenes act as steppingstones towards this final resolution, yet they cannot be reduced into mere incidental steps in the process if the story is worth much of anything. For a scene to mechanically point towards a future resolution without bearing its own weight is a sure sign of a heavy-handed writer and a poor story, for it paints a shallow picture of reality. The enchantment provided by wonder points not away from the present but through it towards eventual fulfillment. The form which this fulfillment takes is not revealed by wonder alone, but that there is a coming

[37] Buber, *I and Thou*, 11.

fulfillment cannot be denied.[38] In a world that has constantly lost something, then, wonder reminds us of the continued purposefulness that pervades and moves through these losses without trivializing them into simply the cost of a good thing. It re-enchants us with the world as it changes and transforms into continually new moments.

While wonder re-embeds and re-enchants us with the world of loss and gain in which we dwell, there are yet sorrowful things which it must contend with. Beyond the loss of potential or time, there are also some parts of reality and the human experience which, by nature of their deep moral bankruptcy or tremendous loss, disallow wonder altogether. In an age of modern warfare, destruction, manipulation, and abuse of power, such sorrowful things are undeniable. Although they cannot be wondered at, sorrowful things cannot merely be included in the empty things discussed in the previous section. They are anything but empty. Rather, they are far too abundantly filled with pain, evil, or loss to be without substance. The pain, loss, or evil within such things is and must be unquantifiable, unable to be compared or measured without cheapening it in some manner. Just as wonder draws the presence before us to encompass our entire horizon, so too do sorrowful things eclipse the horizon with their tremendous brokenness. They too must be addressed as entities unto themselves, yet in a manner wholly without wonder.

How then are we to locate wonder against such sorrowful things? Are they the blow which destroys wonder for good? Despite the fact that wonder cannot bloom on the surface of true sorrow, the authenticity born of wonder is necessary for us to properly mourn, lament, and lay sorrowful things to rest, though they are never erased. Articulating the reality of these sorrowful things can only be done if they are given their own weight to bear beyond ourselves,

[38] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 71.

even if that weight is in the negation of good rather than its presence. In an essay on Strauss's *Metamorphosen*, a string composition written in the wake of Nazi Germany and its many horrors, the philosopher Roger Scruton states that "[w]e can lose everything; but if we are still conscious of that loss and what it means, then there is something that we have not lost. All is not lost, if art remains, to show that all is lost."[39] We may not wonder at sorrow, but we can and ought to wonder at substance which has been lost in sorrow. In wonder we feel a glimmer of home through the light of the fire in its hearth and the smell of its smoke and incense. This view of home and belonging is not a sentimental escape from the sorrows of life, but rather a substantial affirmation of them. The warmth of the fire does not deny the many hours spent and blisters gained in gathering the wood or the cold which the fire combats, nor does it promise to erase them from having ever been.

In the face of losses both great and small, wonder does not erase nor provide satisfactory explanation but instead re-harmonizes the soul with the world that has been irrevocably bent by sorrow. We are re-embedded into the world as it now is and re-enchanted into the possibility for grace. To be re-embedded into the world is anything but a return to the way things were before sorrow, but it is also not an utter denial of goodness existing after sorrow either. Instead, it embraces the world that is now *less than*, continuing without that which once was. Enchantment too differs fundamentally from a trite economic model that labels sorrow the cost for an eventual good. There cannot be any form of necessity found in great loss, but instead enchantment highlights that, just as sudden loss is possible, so too is grace. For Tolkien this grace is found in moments of "eucatastrophe," that is, the sudden good turn which occurs in a good fairy-story.

[39] Roger Scruton, "Mourning our Losses" in *Confessions of a Heretic* (Confessions of a Heretic (Notting Hill Editions, 2021), 117.

This good turn cannot be expected, and we cannot be offended if it is not given to us for it is grace in the noblest sense of the word: a gift given to an undeserving recipient. The very possibility of eucatastrophe to arrive in the moment of deepest need likewise requires the possibility of its inverse, "dyscatastrophe" or the sudden turn of loss and sorrow.[40] The same is true in the inverse, though, and wonder enchants the heart to sense this possibility for eucatastrophe. By being given a glimpse of the good, we are reminded that we may only consider loss seriously as itself if there is a very real and valuable substance that both has been lost and could *not* have been lost.

The Irresolution of Wonder

Until now I have remained concerned with what wonder is and how it interacts with the world. I have discussed wonder as humble recognition of the other and the sudden revelation of a unified presence beyond the self. I have traced the subsequent embedding and enchanting that occurs in the world of loss and gain and ultimately provides authenticity amidst sentimentality. What remains, then, is for me to lay out the result of wonder as it ends. The wonderful moment, being woven out of paradoxes which only resolve in experience, draws to a close in a moment of ecstasy. This ecstasy is of the sort experienced by St. Aquinas upon his death bed, wherein he declared all his previous writings, thoughts, and work to pale in comparison to that which he experienced.[41] Ecstasy of this sort denies comprehension yet begs – or perhaps even demands – affirmation. In the midst of wonder our very being cries out with a resounding amen that drowns out the possibility for thought to follow. We affirm both sides of the tension, whether between

[40] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 153.
[41] Roger Scruton, "Effing the Ineffable" in Confessions of a Heretic (Notting Hill Editions, 2021), 89.

goodness and sorrow, timelessness and time, or embedding and enchanting, with an essential affirmation spoken from the core of our being. Both sides of these tensions are intimately known yet fundamentally beyond comprehension, for we may not step beyond the horizon.[42] The ecstatic moment combines affirmation of the past and intimations of future fulfillment to form a moment of timelessness within time. For Scruton, such moments make up the experience of the sacred, for they are inexpressibly saturated with a sense of the beyond.[43] Just as wonder draws a unified presence to be more than a thing among things, so too does it draw the ecstatic moment to be more than a moment among moments.[44] Once we are no longer wondering, we may certainly reflect back on that ecstatic moment, but we cannot re-enter it in our memory. We only hold the ghost of that present which existed within time.

I use the term ecstatic with tremendous intention here, for the fullest moment of wonder is itself unstable and mobile, opposing a static view of the world. It vibrates with meaning. Much like how the vibration of a plucked string on a violin leads to echoing soundwaves resonating out through the air, wonder plucks upon a world held in tension and resonates outward into all of life. As we enter wonder we are then drawn to resonate sympathetically with this ecstatic vibration and move towards authenticity.[45] Yet this sympathetic resonance is necessarily unstable. Since wonder is so fundamentally beyond comprehension or complete expression, there arises a powerfully affirmative knowledge that is profoundly unclear to reason. We cannot put this ecstatic moment into words, just as we cannot sufficiently describe the moment of falling in love or the flavors of a freshly baked chocolate chip cookie. No amount of adjectives bundled

[42] Roger Scruton, *On Human Nature* (Princeton University Press, 2017), 31.
[43] Scruton, *On Human Nature,* 128.
[44] Buber, *I and Thou*, 84.
[45] Scruton, *Beauty,* 147.

together may accurately evoke these moments in their entirety, for they exist in the realm of sensuous and experiential knowledge as opposed to intellectual. I do not comprehend the flavors of a chocolate chip cookie in its entirety, but I know them all the same.

We cannot dwell in wonder indefinitely, however. Despite the fact that wonder places us into the immanent present outside of time, it can only be for a moment. We cannot live our lives in constant wonder and ecstasy, for we must re-enter the world of things in order to live and to do.[46] We are temporal beings and must therefore return to time. Indeed, to cling to wonder after it has run its course is to run straight back to sentimentality.[47] As such, we cannot hope to avoid wonder's end and ought not avoid it. Indeed, the goal of wonder is not to further itself but instead to reinvigorate the self towards authenticity. We do not leave wonder having had our fill of it.[48] It is not the result of an impulse like hunger or thirst, nor is it born of a simple desire.[49] Wonder instead comes to an end because the temporal world is not capable of containing infinity and timelessness, so it must return us to the world of things.

Since wonder cannot, and ought not, be maintained forever, what wonder provides is a heart re-embedded and re-enchanted as it enters into the mundane. This embedded and enchanted heart stands out amidst the things around it, for it is authentic in the face of the sentimental, present in the face of the abstract, and enchanted in the face of disenchantment. We carry the spark of the You out from wonder, and by it we re-invigorate the mere things around us with this newfound substance.[50] Wonder must point back to reality, and reality must be lived. There is a

[46] Buber, *I and Thou*, 29.
[47] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 132.
[48] Scruton, *Beauty,* 16.
[49] Buber, *I and Thou*, 10.
[50] Buber, *I and Thou*, 45.

critical distinction here between wonder and authenticity: wonder is *not* authenticity, but it is the pathway *to* authenticity. We need to be nourished by wonder's connection to the world around us, but that nourishment must lead to actions *within* that world, not apart from it.[51]

Overall, I cannot provide some set of criteria that defines wonder, nor a recipe for developing it. Instead, I may only point out that wonder must be known by being known. Those who have wondered will know this to be the case, for it springs up when we least expect it and clings to our hearts despite our selfish protestations. Those who have never wondered have yet to gain this certainty. In Lewis's retelling of the myth of Cupid and Psyche, the protagonist hears the voice of true Divinity and knows it to be Divine without question.[52] The same is true for wonder. Its voice is unmistakable and its touch undeniable.

[51] Taylor, *Cosmic Connections*, 105.
[52] C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces: A Myth Retold* (Harper Collins Publishing, 1984), 146.

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